Ego-tripping with James Dickey

". . . the journal serves as a catchall; more often than not, catching inanities best left in the secret places of thought."

I became aware of the artist in James Dickey prior to his meteoric rise to fame and mass publication when a friend of mine, now a Self-Addressed, Stamped Envelope poet himself, participated in a poetry workshop conducted by the poet.

This particular workshop was filled with well-intentioned old ladies whose poetic style was limited primarily to the sand-sea-and-forget-me-not genre. Perhaps my friend's secret taste for sadism was heightened by Dickey's very matter-of-fact putdown of the nostalgic whimsy contained in much of the work . . . at any rate, he returned temporarily infatuated with what he described as Dickey's "powerful presence."

Trusting my friend's judgement implicitly, I began reading Dickey, liked what I read and eventually became his slight champion, defending his anecdotal style and command of language whenever he became the target of abuse in some literary rap session.

Dickey was quite often a target in those days — again, this was at a time when Dickey was one of a hundred competent, but seldom anthologized poets in the U. S. beginning to be published "in the right places" — British critics tended to disregard him as a regional writer, and one small literary magazine I remember devoted about half its space to descrediting most of his works.

I managed to sustain my respect for his work through several assaults: the first in the winter of 1967 when the then short-haired, drabbily-dressed poet (a picture in the "Clemson Chronicle" reveals shoes with huge holes in the soles) appeared on the Clemson campus, got drunk at a faculty party and (it was heavily rumored) made somewhat a spectacle of himself baying at the moon outside the women's dormitory.

While the English faculty may have been indignant, I figured drinking and wenching was all part of the poetic image. I was more interested in the talent I saw in lines like these from "On The Coosawattee:"

Into the slain tons of needles,
On something like time and dark knowledge
That cannot be told, we are riding
Over white stones forward through fir trees,
To follow whatever the river
Through the clasping of roots follows deeply.

Then in 1970, Dickey published "Deliverance," the work which took him out of those drab clothes and put him into feathered hats and expensive suits . . . and for a time, black leather jackets. I read it, was secretly unimpressed . . . puzzled . . . even more puzzled when the book received the National Book Award for Fiction.

I stopped reading Dickey for the most part, but was still prone to defend him; even as recently as last fall when he appeared once more at Clemson, thoroughly drunk, and was paid almost two thousand dollars for delivering a blathering hodgepodge of incoherences before what was undoubtedly the largest audience a creative person ever drew there.

Then I read "Sorties."

". . . I think too much of my body to offer it around to just anybody or to keep it un-lucid with drugs. Reality is drug enough for me. I detest people who try to proselytize for drugs or offer philosophical reasons as to why it is desirable to use them."

— Sorties p.81

A dozen pages into Dickey's journal and I was dumb-founded. What struck me immediately, and what has continued to strike me as I have read it again and again in preparation for this piece, is the amazing amount of hypocrisy packed into 151 pages of what might be described as drippings from the poet's rather mundane existence.

The quote above is a typical example. Elsewhere in the journal, Dickey writes: "I have been drunk, more or less, for about the last twenty-five years. Everything I remember is colored at least to some extent by alcohol. what's to make of this?

Dickey "detests people who try to proselytize for drugs or offer philosophical reasons as to why it is desirable to use them." He reiterated this point in a recent "Greenville News" interview when he said this about hippies: "What I dislike about them is their narcotics. (This) is a pleasure subculture — stressing liquor, sex, food — reflecting America, a soft America."

Yet on page 55 of "Sorties," this entry:

"I think with terrible sadness of the evening spent with the astronauts a couple of nights before Walter Schirra's liftoff. I was drunk out of my mind, and could not focus on anything that happened, but simply sat in a corner in a drunken stupor attempting conversation with one or another nice young fellow who drifted by . . . And yet, if I had been cold sober, what would I have done? Would I have been an eager-eyed, middle-aged fellow, terribly receptive to all their personalities, and so on? No; if I had it to do again, I would be a drunken poet among the ad-tronauts. And, by God, I was a drunken poet. I remember them; now let them remember me."

The dichotomy between Dickey's upright Southern moralism and his own personal decadence is clearly defined, even within the limits of the quote itself, for first Dickey is "terribly sad," only to become defiant near the end: ". . . by God, I was a drunken poet . . . " Here he seems to be role-playing, attempting to live out some concept he has of what a poet ought to be; a latter-day Dylan Thomas, blind drunk, but beautiful. Dickey's own holy proselytizing elsewhere in the book and in the local press, however, breaks down this image of the sensitive, sensual poet and reveals a rather hypocritical middle-aged man, capable of mouthing moral axioms over a stiff drink.

Perhaps one of the keys to this disparity in Dickey's personality is his worship of the physical. He likes to picture himself as a clean sport — and sportsman. Like Lewis, the protagonist in "Deliverance," Dickey fancies himself as a man able to take on the wilderness and conquer it . . . indeed, on page 75 of the book, we find the one-line entry, "I am Lewis; every word is true." We are tantalized. Really? Did you really kill a hillbilly homo and bury him out in the swamp? Wow.

Dickey dwells on this physical ego-trip in his journal. ". . . It is a nice feeling to know that you could take on any big game animal and be confident that you could hit it in a vital area . . . ," he tells himself (and us) in one entry. "I cannot stand myself when my belly is full of food," he says somewhere else. His life is physically rich; he will not be a part of "soft America." Yet, while he is capable of telling us in one place, ". . . the trouble is that there is not dignity and decency and wholesomeness in it," he also makes this entry, "With age, the only thing that matters is one's perversions."

The dichotomy of "Sorties" doesn't stop here. The journal also indicates the tremendous depth of Dickey's ego, with such entries as, "I am sick of poets who tell us, in a clever and-or sensitive way, what we all know. I want now to gear myself up to say what nobody could have thought of in a hundred million years. This is coming; I feel it."

This rather astounding view of himself as Prophetic Bard is repeated again and again in the pages of the journal. On page 54, he tells us (or himself), "It seems to me that I am the bearer of some kind of immortal message to humankind. What is this message? I don't know, but it exists." His confidence in his own ability seems almost infinite; for example: ". . . Poetry is very easy for me, though I work at it more than most generations of poets work on poems. But I know, when I begin something, that it will be at least reasonably good; I have never been wrong about this . . ."

Yet despite this fantastic degree of egocentricity, Dickey falls into pages of dispair during the course of his journal. Consider the series of successive entries on page 75 of "Sorties":

"If I slowed my life down, and lived more like an ordinary person, I might live a very long time and this is supposed to be the desired object of all human life. But it is not. The main thing is to ride the flood tide. Only a few get a chance to do this and one year of it is worth a thousand years of mediocrity."

"My God, I feel rotten. What is wrong with me this time? I don't know, but I can shore it up with will; I have done it so many times before."

and then:

"Isn't there anything I want to do, anymore? No; only what I have to do."

I keep wondering why. Why publish a journal which so obviously reveals the winner of the National Book Award as a rather confused, middle-aged man, slowly growing fat and gray, filled with delusions about bringing the Universal Message to the world? Perhaps Dickey felt it would provide insights for present and future generations into the intricate mindweb of a great poet. If so, he has failed. For when Dickey is not contradicting himself on the pages of the journal, he fills the pages with seeming irrelevancies. On the first page, he ponders his reasons for starting the journal, stating, "Surely I am not likely to say anything scandalous or private in it . . . the journal, if such it is, will be simply a catchall, and will contain everything from meditations on the sublime to laundry lists."

While Dickey generously relieves us of the burden of perusing his laundry inventory, the journal does serve as a catchall; more often than not, catching inanities best left in the secret places of thought. All minds, even great ones, are subject to flashes of irrelevance which for an instant may appear to the thinker as inspired, but what of these tidbits chosen at random from "Sorties"? (I should say at this point that the journal consists of random entries, varying in length, with little or no connection between one entry and the next.)

"If this book is going to appear, that will mean that I have five volumes coming out within the next year. That is a lot."

"Why is an icepick so much more horrifying to anyone than a straight razor?"

"But they are both very good bows indeed, and I am very lucky to have them."

"A Negro is a black man."

"More observations on bronze guitar strings versus silk and steel . . . ."

"Can it possibly be that someone thinks of me as the answer to everything?"

"The Dickey Diet is very simple indeed."

"The best way to live in America is to be in a position to flaut its values and enjoy its money."

". . . masturbation . . . seems to me to be one of the most profound forms of self-communication and even self-communion."

"No one will ever be able to reconstruct my life. It is more complicated and more unknowable than that of Lawrence of Arabia."

"Sorties" was a mistake. For while it will undoubtedly be an asset to future critics attempting to deal with Dickey's work, it will reveal less of the genius he is now praised for than it will the melodramatic meanderings of a former ad executive who turned to verse and somehow made it big in the crazy sixties.

Perhaps the final blow the journal deals us comes in a series of comments on pages 70 and 71 which reveal a love affair Dickey had with a young girl while he was consultant to the Library of Congress.

We assume from some of what is said that Dickey was deeply involved with the girl, who suddenly died or was killed . . . too deeply involved to reduce this affair to the status of macabre humor with such single entries as "She lies in Glendale, in Forest Lawn," (which appears twice), or "My God, to hold that big sweaty body in my arms again!"

The melodrama is unbearable . . . we are embarrassed that Dickey has revealed this affair to us in so maudlin a fashion . . . even Dickey senses it when he writes: "Am I getting back into the terrible morbid nostalgia of the romantic poets, with all the emphasis on (her) now? I don't know, and I don't care . . . "

Perhaps embarassment is the key to my feelings toward the journal. I am embarrassed when I see the explicit contradictions between Dickey the Culture Hero and Dickey the Man Growing Old; Dickey the Clean Sport and Dickey the Sensual Animal; Dickey the Immortal Poet and Dickey the Despondent Author. I am embarrassed because he lacked the good judgment to examine the journal when completed and consign it to a private place. But he was apparently too caught up in his rapid rise to public prominence; too anxious to publish while he was (and is) hot, to realize the journal was too private a work to give to his public.

As for the curious dichotomies revealed in Dickey through the journal, perhaps they can best be ascribed to a comment Dickey makes in "Sorties" in regards to Hemingway and Yeats, and perhaps himself:

"One feels so damn sorry for writers, the poor posers. People like Hemingway and Yeats spend their whole lives trying to make good a pose because they despise themselves. They put infinite time and energy into trying to make themselves come true, when they know that it's all a damn lie, anyway."

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